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HISTORY

OF THE

ANCIENT

WORLD

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# A History of Byzantium

Second Edition

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14

## *The Beginnings of Decline*

250	500	750	1000	1250	1500
1321	Beginning of civil war				
1331	Stefan Dušan king of Serbia				
1389	Battle of Kosovo				
1391	Manuel II emperor				

### **Andronikos II (1282–1328)**

Michael VIII died in 1282, leaving the empire in what appeared to be very good condition. To be sure, Byzantium had re-emerged onto the stage as a major player in international affairs. Nonetheless, his successors were completely unable to maintain the political and military power of Michael's empire, and it is an open question to what degree his policies were responsible for this decline. On the one hand, Michael had expended enormous energy to restore Byzantium to a position of power, and this had possibly weakened the broader fabric of the Byzantine economy and state. On the other hand, we must be careful when we blame the successful Michael VIII for the failures that took place under the rule of his successors. Ostrogorsky is clear in his assessment of the situation: "In reality there were more deep-seated reasons to account for the rapid decline of Byzantine power...The internal weaknesses of the state were incurable and increasing external pressure drove Byzantium irretrievably toward catastrophe" (p. 479). In Ostrogorsky's view, the rise of the Ottomans and Serbia took place at a time when the state had been weakened by the expenditure of Michael VIII, and he notes that it is "these momentous factors in foreign and domestic politics, and not the personal qualities of its rulers, which really account for the decline of



Byzantium” (ibid.).

**Map 14.1** The Balkans and eastern Europe in the fourteenth century (after D. Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe, 500–1453* (New York, 1971), map 8, p. 238)



Upon the death of Michael VIII, the throne passed without incident to his son Andronikos II (1282–1328), whose long reign was marked by significant difficulties and defeats for Byzantium. At this time the practice of using members of the imperial family of the Palaiologoi as provincial governors became widespread, so that they were effectively semi-independent rulers of parts of the empire. In this one may note the ultimate victory of the Byzantine

nobility, which had long sought power that was essentially personal and independent of the central state. This phenomenon was associated with western concepts of political power, and the desire of the emperor's second wife Irene (Yolanda) of Montferrat to divide imperial territory among her sons was regarded as a sign of western influence, according to the contemporary historian Gregoras. Irene was ultimately unsuccessful in her plans, although she was able to marry her daughter Simonis to the Serbian king Milutin, and she continued to negotiate with him after her estrangement from her husband. Andronikos was clear in his rejection of Irene's demands for what amounted to the abandonment of the Byzantine idea of the state, but he allowed the growth of the de facto independence of the great landowners which, in turn, weakened the state economically, since the landowners were normally able to avoid payment of taxes to the central government. The old system of *pronoia* had survived and had been used by the emperors of Nicaea, and Michael VIII made the grant hereditary. The practice became more widespread under his successors, and the obligation of the *pronoiar* to perform a service for the state weakened notably.

More than most emperors, Andronikos II depended on his eldest son, Michael IX, who had been named co-emperor in 1281 and crowned in 1294 or 1295. Michael was an energetic and generally competent commander, and Andronikos shared power with him willingly, leaving most military matters in his hands.

Upon his accession, Andronikos II was forced to cut costs, and he did so first in the military, reducing significantly the size of the army and essentially eliminating the Byzantine navy, placing his hopes at sea entirely in his alliance with the Genoese. After some time the emperor was able to restore the military, to a certain degree, as a result of increasing state revenues. He was able to do this by the introduction (apparently in 1304) of the *sitokrithon*, a supplementary tax on land, to be paid in kind, and the elimination of some tax exemptions. These measures were not altogether successful, but they did allow the emperor to purchase mercenaries, pay off especially dangerous enemies, and maintain a surprisingly small military force, including a total of only 3,000 cavalry.

Andronikos was especially interested in religious affairs. He was opposed to the failed policy of union with Rome, and he abandoned the policy of his father, who had seen the papacy as a basis for securing western support. The Sicilian Vespers had put an end to the workability of this policy, and immediately on his accession Andronikos repudiated the union and restored the traditional position of the Orthodox church. Unfortunately for Byzantium, however, as soon as this obstacle between the emperor and the church was removed, dispute broke out

yet again between the Arsenites, who continued to revere the memory of the deposed patriarch, and those who supported the more moderate policies of the emperor. Andronikos made a gesture to the Arsenites in 1284 and allowed the body of Arsenios to be brought back to Constantinople, where it was regarded with honor by his followers. The dispute dragged on, however, until the patriarch Niphon was finally able to negotiate a compromise and the schism came to an end in 1310.

Andronikos took considerable interest in the administration of the church, reorganizing dioceses and regulating monasteries. One of the more important of these actions was his decision of 1311 by which the *protos* of Mount Athos, who presided over all the monasteries on the Holy Mountain, was no longer to be appointed by the emperor but by the patriarch of Constantinople. In this and in many other ways the Byzantine church maintained or even expanded its authority in this period, frequently far outside the increasingly narrow territory controlled by the Byzantine state.

In fact, after suffering from the raids of the Catalan Grand Company early in the fourteenth century, the monasteries of Mount Athos enjoyed a new era of prosperity and importance. During this period the monasteries received many large grants of land, some from private individuals, but even more from the emperors, and these were far-flung, including properties in Serbia, Wallachia, and the islands of the northern Aegean, and not only fields but also some urban properties. The records from the administration, rental, and sale of these holdings, many of which survive, provide especially important information about society in this period (not just the monasteries, but also agricultural and commercial life, along with the daily existence of the peasants). Several new monasteries were founded, including those of Gregoriou, Dionysiou, Pantokrator, and Simonopetra. This period also witnessed the development of “idiorrhythmic monasticism,” in which the monks lived more or less according to their own rules, frequently worshiping together in the church of the monastery but taking their meals separately and, not uncommonly, owning private property.

Not surprisingly, Andronikos’ foreign policy focused largely on the few Latin claimants to power in the Byzantine sphere. For example, as already mentioned, he took as his second wife Yalonda of Montferrat, the daughter of the last titular Latin ruler of Thessaloniki, who gladly surrendered his claim to his daughter and her children. After the Sicilian Vespers most of the significant western powers had lost interest in the East; those who maintained some hope of intervention were players of the second rank: Philip of Tarentum (son of Charles II, king of

Naples, and grandson of Charles of Anjou) and Charles of Valois, brother of Philip IV (the Fair) of France and titular Latin emperor of Constantinople. Although each of these sought to intervene in Byzantine affairs, none was successful; their alliances with Epiros and Thessaly only prompted Andronikos to respond, relatively successfully, with military force.

**Map 14.2** The Byzantine Empire, ca. 1350 (after Averil Cameron, *The Byzantines* (Oxford, 2006), map 6, p. 97, and A. Kazhdan et al., eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (New York, 1991), p. 359)



Under Milutin (1282–1321) Serbia provided challenges as well as opportunities for Byzantium. Attacks on Macedonia caused Andronikos to seek a marriage alliance with Milutin: a proposed marriage with the emperor's sister Eudokia failed when the latter refused to cooperate. Both Andronikos and Milutin sought the alliance, however, and both finally overcame local opposition, and in 1299 the Serbian king was married to Andronikos' daughter Simonis (who was only 5 years old at the time). This marriage, although it failed to produce an heir, was the beginning of an intense period of interaction in which Byzantine influence in Serbia reached a high point. Byzantine architects, painters, scholars, and missionaries found their way to Serbia, and the Serbian court became a significant factor in the spread of Byzantine culture into the

northern Balkans. As had often happened in the past, the Serbian rulers saw the connection with Byzantium as a means to help solidify their control over the local aristocracy and to provide important symbols of their power and control over their own territory.

**Figure 14.1** Gracanica. This impressive church was built near the modern town of Pristina by the Serbian king Stefan Uro3 II Milutin in 1311. It stands as an important monument to the conversion of the Serbs to Christianity and to relations between Slavs and Byzantines in the later Middle Ages. The architecture is sophisticated and complex and the fourteenth-century frescoes on the interior are well preserved, including portraits of members of the Serbian royal family. This church, like many other religious buildings in the Balkans, has been damaged and is still threatened by sectarian violence designed, in part, to remove the historical traces of one group or another from a contested landscape. Photo © Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Image Collections & Fieldwork Archives, Washington DC (Slobodan Curčić).



As mentioned above, Andronikos had committed himself to alliance with Genoa. In 1294 war broke out between Venice and Genoa, as they struggled for dominance in the East. This devolved into a war between Venice and Byzantium, as the Genoese withdrew from the conflict and even signed a peace treaty with

Venice in 1299. Without a fleet of its own, Byzantium could not effectively resist the Venetians, and in a peace treaty signed in 1302 the Venetians retained all their old trading privileges. The Genoese, meanwhile, did not lose their position, but they fortified their settlement in Galata, across the Golden Horn from Constantinople, and in 1304 the Genoese general Benedetto Zaccaria seized the island of Chios, which they were to hold for years.

The Byzantines experienced the greatest difficulty in Asia Minor. The Mongol (or Tatar) invasions, which had brought some relief to Byzantium in previous reigns, caused many refugees to pour into Asia Minor from the East. Perhaps because of the recapture of Constantinople and the shift of attention to the West, the empire had paid less attention to Asia Minor in the years since 1261. As a result, Byzantium was able to offer little resistance to the Turkic people who spread across the countryside, and by the beginning of the fourteenth century virtually all of Asia Minor, with the exception of the great cities, had been lost to Byzantine control. Instead, Asia Minor was divided into a great many independent Turkic principalities, not least of which was that of Osman (1288–1326), founder of the Ottoman dynasty, in Bithynia.

### **Box 14.1 The Condition of Asia Minor at the End of the Fourteenth Century**

Manuel II Palaiologos (1391–1425) was a clever and hard-working emperor, but he also found himself compelled to go to war as the vassal of the Ottoman sultan Bayezid I. While on campaign with the sultan, Manuel kept in touch with his friends in Constantinople by writing and receiving letters. These letters were read aloud, within a narrow circle of highly educated men who appreciated the compositions, not so much for the information they conveyed as for their careful rhetorical composition. In several of these letters, written during a difficult campaign in Asia Minor, the emperor vividly described conditions in the former Byzantine heartland. The following passages provide elegant testimony of how Asia Minor, the former core of the Byzantine Empire, had changed completely, especially as a result of the Turkish occupation:

Letter 16, to Cydones

Asia Minor, winter 1391

A great expanse of land has your letter traversed; after passing over mountains and fording rivers, it has finally found us here in a tiny, little plain, encircled by a chain of precipitous mountains, as a poet would say, so that it barely suffices as an encampment for the army. In appearance and in reality it is an extremely savage place. Apart from a little wood and some murky water, it cannot provide us with anything. It has been deserted by the inhabitants, who have fled to the clefts in the rocks, to the forests, and to the mountain heights in an effort to escape a death from which there is no escape, a very cruel and inhuman death without any semblance of justice. For every mouth which is opened in answer is immediately closed by the sword. Nobody is spared, neither very young children nor defenseless women...



The small plain in which we are now staying certainly had some name when it was fortunate enough to be inhabited and ruled by the Romans [Byzantines]. But now when I ask what it was, I might as well ask about the proverbial winds of a wolf, since there is absolutely nobody to inform me. To be sure, you can see many cities here, but they lack what constitutes the true splendor of a city and without which they could not really be termed cities, that is, human beings. Most of these cities now lie in ruins, a pitiable spectacle for the people whose ancestors once possessed them. But not even the names have survived, since they were destroyed so long ago...

You have heard of the city of Pompey [Pompeiopolis], beautiful, marvelous, extensive; rather, that is how it once was, for now you can barely make out its ruins. It is situated on the banks of a river which is crossed by a stone bridge, adorned with colonnades, marvelous for their size, their beauty and their skillful construction. Indeed, this city and these magnificent remains offer no less evidence why the Romans bestowed on its founder the surname of "the Great" [that is, Pompey, the Great, as he was called] than the many victories which amply justified this title. Now, after leaving this city and then the city of Zeno behind us, with Sinope off to the left and the Halys on the other side, we have already been marching for many days, using the sun for our guide. For we must head directly toward the rising sun if we are not to lose our way. (George T. Dennis, *The Letters of Manuel II Palaeologus* (Washington DC, 1977), pp. 42–3)

Andronikos did not have the military resources to counter the Turkic threat, so he sought aid from allies. He first joined forces with the Alans, people from the Caucasus area who were brought into Asia Minor to counter the Turks; but this was a complete failure. In 1303 he then allied himself with Roger de Flor, commander of the Catalan Grand Company, a band of mercenaries from Spain who had previously fought for various western leaders. Ferocious and innovative fighters, the Catalans were a power unto themselves who owed no loyalty to any ruler and assisted whoever provided them with the best reward. Andronikos honored Roger with the title of caesar and married him to his niece Maria Asen. In 1304 the Catalans had some notable success in northwestern Asia Minor, but they also attacked the Byzantine population, especially when the emperor was not always able to supply their agreed-upon payments. They crossed over to Europe and continued their ravages, which were only amplified after the assassination of Roger de Flor in 1305, perhaps carried out on the orders of Michael IX, Andronikos' son who (as we have said) had been co-emperor since 1294 or 1295. Michael took the field against the Catalans but was decisively defeated, and for two years the Catalans ravaged Thrace before they descended into Macedonia.

These difficulties gave the Bulgarian tsar Theodore Svetoslav (1300–22) the opportunity to seize Byzantine strongholds on the Black Sea, and Charles of Valois renewed his efforts in the East, coming to terms with Venice, Serbia, and even the Catalan Company. The Catalans, however, had their own interests at heart; they conquered Thessaly, and at the Battle of the Kiphissos in Boeotia

(1311; Map 9.1) they defeated Walter of Brienne and killed the majority of the knights of Frankish Greece. The Catalans set themselves up as the rulers of Athens, which they held for the next 70 years. As a result of this, the plans of western claimants to power against Byzantium collapsed, and, oddly enough, the success of the Catalans gave Byzantium the opportunity to strengthen its position in the Morea (Peloponnesos), which was henceforth to be an important outpost of Byzantine culture and power.

## **Civil War**

Andronikos' son Michael IX died in 1320 at the age of 43. Previous to this a serious break had occurred between the old emperor Andronikos II and his grandson and namesake, Andronikos III. The younger Andronikos, son of Michael IX, had already been crowned co-emperor, but his frivolous lifestyle and violent behavior caused the elder emperor to exclude him from the succession. Members of the aristocracy, such as John Kantakouzenos, who held offices in the provinces, used the crisis as an opportunity to revolt against the rule of Constantinople, and in 1321 Andronikos III assumed leadership of this movement. Unencumbered by fiscal responsibilities, he offered lavish gifts and exemptions to his supporters, and the old emperor was forced to come to terms with his grandson, whom he accepted as his co-ruler in 1325. Civil war broke out again in 1327 and came to involve the Slavic kingdoms, as Serbia supported the elder and Bulgaria the younger Andronikos; in addition, the civil war allowed large numbers of ethnic Albanians to flood into imperial territory, where they remained essentially independent for a time. In large part because of opposition to Andronikos II's austere financial policies, Andronikos III's popularity grew; in 1328 he was able to enter Constantinople unopposed, and he forced his grandfather to abdicate.

### **Andronikos III (1328–1341)**

John Kantakouzenos, who had been one of Andronikos III's greatest supporters, essentially held the reins of state under the new emperor, while Andronikos devoted himself primarily to military affairs. Kantakouzenos sought to craft a workable foreign policy based upon the reality that Serbia and the Ottoman state had become the most powerful of Byzantium's rivals, while the threat from the West had seriously weakened. Kantakouzenos also sought to eliminate

Byzantium's dependence on Genoa by the construction of a fleet, which was paid for in large part by contributions from the nobility. In Asia Minor the Ottomans had continued their advance, taking Bursa (Prousa), which henceforth became their capital. Kantakouzenos allied the empire with the remaining Seljuk emirs, whose existence was likewise threatened by the Ottomans.

In the Balkans Byzantium allied with Bulgaria against Serbia, and this led to a trial of strength between the two Slavic kingdoms at Velbuzd in 1330. The battle was a complete victory for the Serbs, who now came to dominate the whole of the southern Balkans. Soon thereafter the new Serbian king, Stefan Uroš IV Dušan (1331–55) made peace with the new Bulgarian tsar Ivan Alexander (1331–71), and he was able to move victoriously into Byzantine Macedonia. One by one the cities of Macedonia fell to Dušan: Ochrid, Prilep, Strumica, Kastoria, and Voden (Edessa). In 1334 a peace treaty was signed, according to which the Serbs were left in control of most of their conquests.

The situation was, if anything, worse in Asia Minor, where Nicaea and Nikomedia fell to the Ottomans, leaving only a few outposts still in Byzantine hands. Just as seriously for the future, after their conquest of Bithynia, the Ottomans constructed a fleet and began to threaten Byzantine possessions from the sea. For the time being, however, the renewed Byzantine navy was equal to the task of defending the capital and even made headway in the Aegean, as Chios and Phokaia were taken from the Genoese, and a western fleet intent on the capture of Lesbos was driven off. Byzantium was meanwhile able to extend its authority in Thessaly and Epiros, where the last survivors of the independent Byzantine successor states recognized the authority of Andronikos III.

## Renewed Civil War

When Andronikos III died in 1341, his son and heir John V was only 9 years old. Almost immediately civil war broke out once again. On one side was the party of the patriarch John Kalekas and Alexios Apokavkos, who were in control of the regency in Constantinople; on the other was the party of the *grand domestikos* John Kantakouzenos, the friend and ally of Andronikos III, whose greatest support was among the provincial aristocracy. Kantakouzenos had himself crowned emperor, as John VI, although he always maintained that he was supporting the legitimate emperor John V. In this context of political confusion a new and highly divisive controversy broke out, which had religious, social, and political consequences.

## Hesychasm and Social Unrest

The controversy had deep roots in monastic practice and theory. Byzantine monks had always sought *hesychia* (tranquility) as a means to communion and union with God. Hesychasm as a specific ascetic practice was promoted particularly by Gregory of Sinai in the early fourteenth century in Thrace and especially in the monasteries of Mount Athos, where he introduced the so-called Jesus Prayer (the words “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me”). Hesychast monks lived a strict ascetic life, including special exercises, breathing, and recital of the Jesus prayer which supposedly led to ecstasy and a vision of Divine Light, which was identified with the Light that was visible on Mount Tabor at the time of the Transfiguration of Christ. In other words, the hesychasts claimed that they could actually see God himself.

The practices of the hesychasts and their claim to see God earned the enmity and ridicule of many theologians, led by the monk Varlaam of Calabria. Varlaam was a thinker of considerable ability who, although born into an Orthodox family in southern Italy, was influenced by the western logical systems of Scholasticism. He became abbot of the Akataleptos Monastery in Constantinople and was an adviser of Andronikos II on religious matters. Around 1335 he began to attack the hesychasts, arguing that the Light on Mount Tabor was created (and thus not eternal) and making fun of his opponents for their practice of contemplation while looking at their navels, calling them *omphalopsychoi* (people with their souls in their navels).

The main defender of hesychasm was Gregory Palamas, who answered Varlaam’s criticisms by making a distinction between the essence of God, which is unknowable and inaccessible to humans, and the uncreated “energies” of God – which are God just the same. The latter are comprehensible by humans and they include the Light of Tabor. Thus, in Palamas’ view, mankind, although a creature, can comprehend and “participate” in God himself. Palamas’ thought was firmly based in the *apophatic* (or “negative”) tradition of Byzantine theology, which held that no logical system was satisfactory for understanding God. Thus, a theologian could say what God was *not* (e.g., “God is not ignorant”) but not what God *is*. Further, frequently closely associated with this approach was a mystical theology that held that God might be perceived and understood through direct experience, a concept that had a long history going back to Pseudo-Dionysios the Areopagite (seventh century) and beyond. Gregory Palamas thus fits into a long tradition of Byzantine thought and in this

respect he was not so much opposed to Scholasticism as to the idea that logical systems could actually define God.

The controversy continued for several years. In 1341 Andronikos III called a council which provided Palamas with a clear victory. The death of the emperor a few days later, however, threw the question into doubt again. Varlaam renewed his attacks, and the religious dispute began to take on a political aspect, with Kantakouzenos and his party generally supporting Palamas and the hesychasts, and the patriarch Kalekas and Apokavkos in opposition. As the latter gained the upper hand, hesychasm was condemned, and Gregory Palamas was for a time imprisoned and excommunicated.

The controversy, however, soon had social as well as political ramifications connected with the struggle for the throne. Kantakouzenos was supported by the aristocracy, and the regency of Apokavkos relied on the support of the urban poor, first in Constantinople and later in the cities of Thrace and Macedonia, where real hatred for the aristocracy had developed. In Thessaloniki the poor and the sailors were organized as a party called the Zealots (not to be confused with the monastic “zealots” of the tenth century) which, in 1342, drove out all members of the aristocracy and the governor appointed by Kantakouzenos, establishing a government that was essentially independent. The Zealot party naturally supported the regency in Constantinople against Kantakouzenos in the struggle for supremacy. Although the historian Gregoras characterized the Zealot regime as “mob rule,” it would be a mistake to see this primarily as a class war, and it is equally misleading to see hard and fast connections between this conflict and the religious dispute over hesychasm. Thus, although there is some evidence that the Zealots in Thessaloniki ridiculed the Christian liturgy, they certainly had no interest in the suppression of hesychasm.

Kantakouzenos, meanwhile, was deprived of most of his military support and he turned to Serbia for assistance. Stefan Dušan was willing to help, and, beginning in 1342, he aided Kantakouzenos in a series of unsuccessful attacks on several Macedonian towns. Kantakouzenos, however, was recognized in Thessaly and Epiros, which led to a split with Dušan, who then switched sides and allied with the regency in Constantinople, arranging the marriage of his son Uroš to the sister of John Palaiologos. Kantakouzenos then formed an alliance with the Seljuk emir Omur, and, with the aid of the Turks, he was able to make notable progress in Thrace, although an attack on Thessaloniki failed. In Constantinople Apokavkos was killed in a prison revolt in 1345, and Kantakouzenos was assured of victory. He was crowned as John VI in 1346 and



assumed the regency for the Palaiologan emperor John V, who had to remain in the background for a further ten years.

The Zealot government in Thessaloniki survived for a time but descended into greater violence against the aristocracy, many of whom were thrown from the walls of the city and massacred by the mob. In 1349 the Zealots sought to surrender the city to Stefan Dušan, but this failed and Kantakouzenos entered the city in 1350 along with Gregory Palamas, who had been elected bishop of the city.

The victory of Kantakouzenos also meant the triumph of hesychasm. In 1351 a council met in the Blachernae palace of Constantinople and proclaimed the orthodoxy of Palamas' theology and condemned Varlaam. Controversy continued on the issue, but hesychast teaching was from then on officially recognized and it was the basis of the thinking of the most influential theologians of the Byzantine church until the end of the empire and beyond.

## Stephan Dušan and the Ascendancy of Serbia

The Serbian king Stefan Dušan gained the greatest advantage from this period of civil war in Byzantium. He controlled all of Macedonia except for Thessaloniki, and he declared himself emperor of the Serbs and the Greeks and was crowned with this title by the independent patriarch of Serbia in 1346. Dušan can therefore be seen in the same light as earlier rulers, such as Symeon of Bulgaria in the tenth century, who wanted to establish a joint Slavo-Byzantine empire. Dušan was especially well disposed toward the monasteries of Mount Athos, which lay inside his territory; he visited Athos himself, and he imitated the Byzantine emperors in his gifts to the monasteries. His reign witnessed the strongest wave of Byzantine influence within Serbia, as Byzantine officials were integrated into the Serbian administration and Greek was used as the language of the chancellery.

**Figure 14.2** St. Merkourios. This dramatic depiction of the military saint Merkourios is from the Protaton church in Karyies, Mount Athos. It dates to the early part of the fourteenth century. According to tradition, Merkourios was a Christian military officer who was executed by the emperor Decius in the third century; interestingly, according to another tradition, Merckourios – returning from the dead – killed the apostate emperor Julian. Photo © Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Image Collections & Fieldwork Archives,

Washington DC (I. Djorjevic, with thanks to Miodrag Markovic).



After Kantakouzenos' victory in the civil wars, Dušan continued his advance in Greece, completing his conquest of Epiros and Thessaly. With very little effort he had doubled his territory, controlling an empire that stretched from the Danube in the north to the Gulf of Korinth in the south. Approximately half of this empire was Greek-speaking, and Dušan himself took a special interest in the Greek part of his realm, leaving the administration of the northern territories to his son Uroš. Dušan was also especially interested in the infrastructure of his empire and its legal system. He promulgated a legal code in 1349 and again in 1354, built essentially on Byzantine models, which served to place his rule on a sound footing and created a basis for the future development of the Serbian state.

As emperor, John VI Kantakouzenos maintained the same policies he had promoted while adviser and claimant to the throne. Members of the imperial family were appointed to positions in the provinces as the best way to prevent governors from declaring independence. Thus, Kantakouzenos appointed his eldest son Matthew as the ruler of Thrace and his second son Manuel as despot of the Morea. In this way he also sought to create a dynasty of his own, parallel to and in rivalry with that of the Palaiologoi.

Kantakouzenos continued to seek independence from the Genoese, and to that

end he again raised what private funds he could for another reconstruction of the Byzantine fleet. He also sought to undermine the Genoese trade monopoly in Constantinople by lowering tariffs for Byzantine merchants, but the Genoese reacted militarily and destroyed the Byzantine navy in 1349.

Byzantium's enemies realized that Kantakouzenos was not the legitimate emperor, and they therefore sought to undermine his power through support of John V Palaiologos. The legitimate emperor himself began to grow restive with the tutelage of Kantakouzenos and he sought power in his own name. In order to placate the young emperor, Kantakouzenos granted John V the territories formerly given to his son Matthew, while transferring to Matthew the areas around Adrianople. Not surprisingly, however, civil war broke out again in 1352 between these two semi-independent principalities. With the support of Turkic mercenaries Kantakouzenos was initially successful, but John V appealed to Serbia and Bulgaria for assistance and Dušan sent a contingent of cavalry, while the Kantakouzenoi were aided by the Ottoman sultan Orhan (1326–62), the successor of Osman. The Turks ultimately defeated the Serbs, and in 1353 Kantakouzenos abandoned the fiction of support for the legitimate dynasty and had his son Matthew proclaimed as co-emperor while John V was deposed.

Meanwhile, Orhan abandoned Kantakouzenos, seized the city of Kallipolis on the Hellespont, and prepared to invade Thrace. Partly as a result of the panic that ensued in Constantinople, John V took heart once more, allied with the Genoese corsair Francesco Gattilusio, and seized Constantinople in 1354. The conspirators forced John Kantakouzenos to abdicate and enter a monastery. Thus, at the age of 25 John V Palaiologos was sole ruler in Constantinople.

As the monk Joasaph, John Kantakouzenos wrote a number of important works and continued to involve himself in the political disputes of the day until his death in 1383. Members of the Kantakouzenos family were able to hold out in the provinces, and Manuel Kantakouzenos at first sought to organize an alliance to overthrow John V and, after renouncing political life in 1357, he devoted himself to the reorganization and strengthening of the Despotate of the Morea.

**Figure 14.3** Presentation of the Virgin, from the Protaton church in Karyies, Mount Athos, early fourteenth century. The cycle of the life of the Virgin was a favorite topic in Byzantine art. This fresco represents an event not mentioned in the canonical New Testament, in which the parents of the Virgin take her to the Temple in Jerusalem, where she is welcomed by the priest Zacharias. In this

scene the Virgin can be seen being presented by her mother, while in the upper right she appears again, inside the Temple, and is given bread by an angel. Particularly lifelike are the paintings of the women who stand to the left of the scene and who look piercingly in different directions. Photo © Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Image Collections & Fieldwork Archives, Washington DC (I. Djorjevic, with thanks to Miodrag Markovic).



## The Economic Situation

Interestingly enough, there is growing evidence of relative economic well-being in the areas under Byzantine control, at least through the middle of the fourteenth century. We are fortunate to have relatively full evidence, from the rich

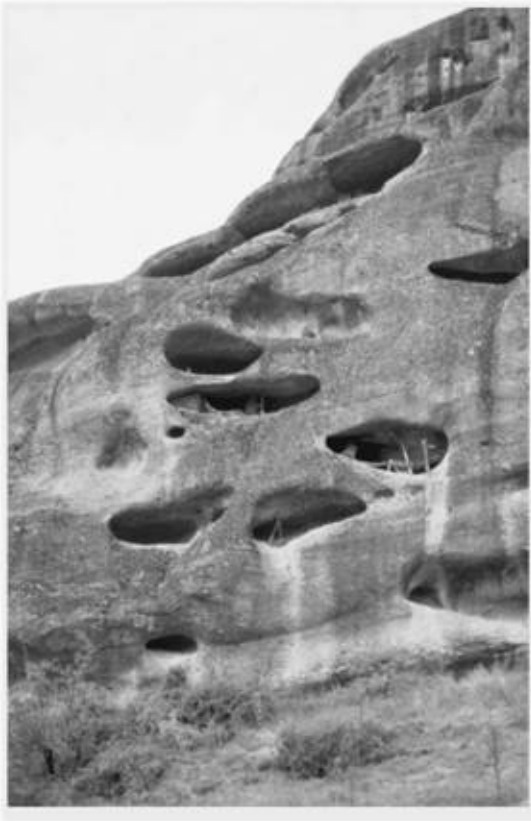
### Box 14.2 The Monasteries of Meteora

The visitor driving west from the Thessalian metropolis of Larissa in central Greece crosses through an enormous plain, unusual in Greece. In the early summer the fields are covered with wheat and in the fall with cotton. Extremes of temperature and weather are common, with searing heat in summer and bitter cold in winter, accompanied by driving rain and – not uncommonly – snow. This is an area that seems far from the coasts of the Aegean Sea and very much a part of the

Balkan world. Storks can be seen perched on chimneys, and in the town of Trikkala there is an impressive Byzantine fortification and one of the largest surviving Ottoman mosques in Greece.

**Figure 14.4** Meteora, the *skete* of Doupiani. These caves in the northwest corner of the plain of Thessaly apparently housed the first hermits in the area. The monks lived in individual caves, one on top of the other, and some of the furniture and remains of wooden material can still be seen in the caves.

Photo: Timothy E. Gregory.



Beyond Trikkala a series of strange rock formations slowly begin to rise sharply out of the flatness of the plain, many well over 200 meters high. As one approaches, the rocks divide into pinnacles and towers that seem tortured and almost alive, dark grey in color and filled with caves. In this remarkable setting are the monasteries of Meteora, once large in number, although today fewer than ten still cling to a precarious existence on the tops of precipitous crags. Meteora, located above the Byzantine town of Stagoi, thus became one of the last Byzantine monastic centers. Like Mount Athos, Meteora survived the fall of Constantinople and remains the most visited Byzantine monastic complex and one of the few places where the traditions of Byzantium come face to face with the modern world.

Thessaly was a major center of wealth during the whole of the Byzantine period, in large part because of its agricultural productivity. Slavs and Vlachs settled in the mountainous area and the Latins gained control of the east after 1204. The western part of the plain, however, remained in Byzantine hands, ultimately under the control of John I Doukas, who established an independent principality in Thessaly, which survived until it was again brought under the control of Constantinople in 1335.



It was in this period that monasticism really developed at Meteora. According to local tradition monks had inhabited the caves in the vicinity since early Byzantine times, but there is no solid evidence of this. The first historical indication of monasticism refers to a loose grouping of monks living in the *skete* (*asketerion*, hermitage) of Doupiani, presumably in the caves around one of the central rock outcrops, probably in the early fourteenth century. Difficulties at Mount Athos, including the dangers posed by Turkish pirate raids, provided the special impetus for the development of Meteora, as monks fled to the relative security of northwestern Thessaly. The earliest surviving church is in the rock-cut monastery of the Hypante, founded in 1366/7.

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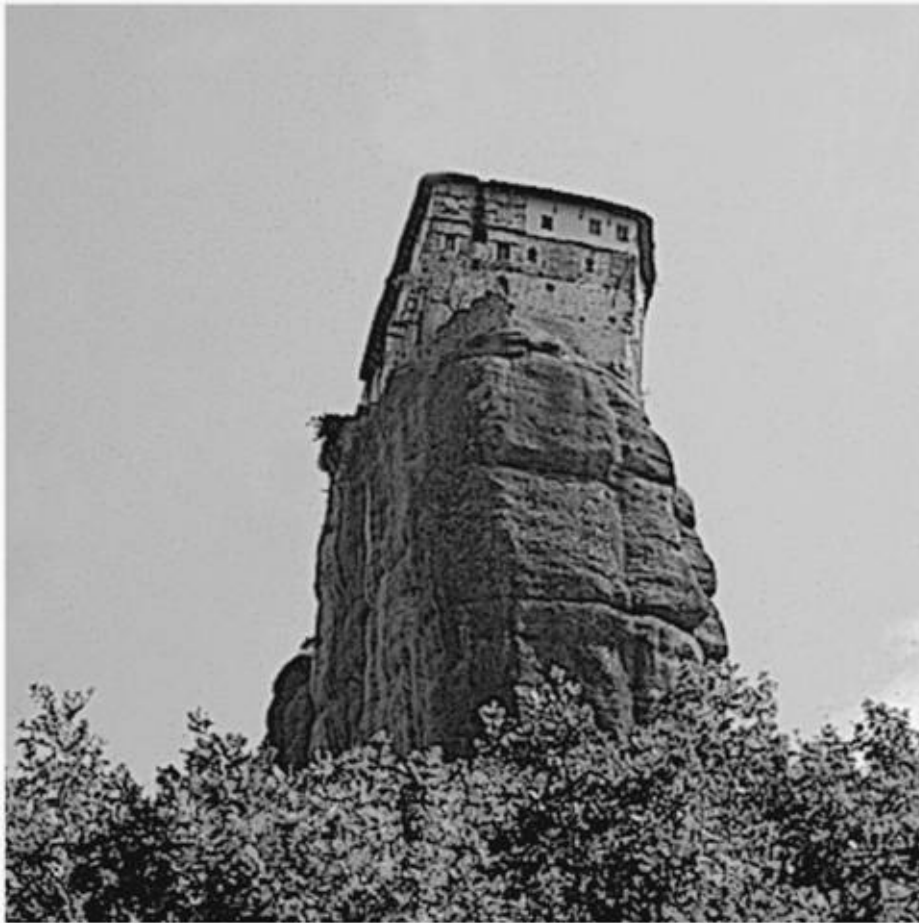
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**Figure 14.5** Meteora, church of the Metamorphosis (Transfiguration) in the Great Meteoron. This is the east end of the church, part of the original *katholikon*, built by John Uro3 Palaiologos, son of the Serbian tsar, who took the monastic name Joasaph. Photo: Timothy E. Gregory.



The most important monastery at Meteora was the Great Meteoron, founded in the late fourteenth century by Athanasios of Meteora. Athanasios was from Neopatras, the most important city of Thessaly at the time, but he studied in Thessaloniki and Constantinople and made contact with some of the leading monastic figures of the day. After a time in Crete, he moved to Mount Athos and then, ca. 1340, to Meteora, where he established a monastery at a place called Platylithos (the “broad rock”) at the center of the Meteora region. In the 1380s, when Serbia dominated Thessaly, John-Ioasaph Uro3, son of Symeon Uro3, became the abbot of the Megalo Meteoron and founded a church dedicated to the Transfiguration, whose eastern end survives in the rebuilt *katholikon* (the public church) of the monastery.

**Figure 14.6** Meteora, the monastery of Rousanou. It is one of the more dramatic of the Meteora monasteries, and it fits snugly on the top of its natural pillar of stone. The monastery was founded in the sixteenth century and has well-preserved frescoes of that century. Photo: Timothy E. Gregory.



In the course of the fourteenth century other monasteries were built at the Meteora: Agios Stephanos and Agios Nikolaos Anapavsas, and new foundations were made through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, under Ottoman control, when the monasteries reached a number of some 23 or so, and several of the churches were painted by important artists including Theophanes of Crete.

Fifty years ago the monasteries of Meteora were in a state of decay, with only a few monks in each of the six or so that were still inhabited. The intervention of the Greek state from the 1960s onward saved the physical structures, and the revitalization of the monastic tradition in more recent years has assured a continuity of function. The Meteora, however, have become a major tourist attraction and hotels, camping sites, and expensive restaurants cover the hills in the surrounding countryside. The monks make an attempt to preserve their way of life, but the Meteora, which was once far removed from the currents of major world events, are now on one of the major tourist roads from Europe into Greece, and it is difficult to know exactly what the future will bring.

### ***FURTHER READING***

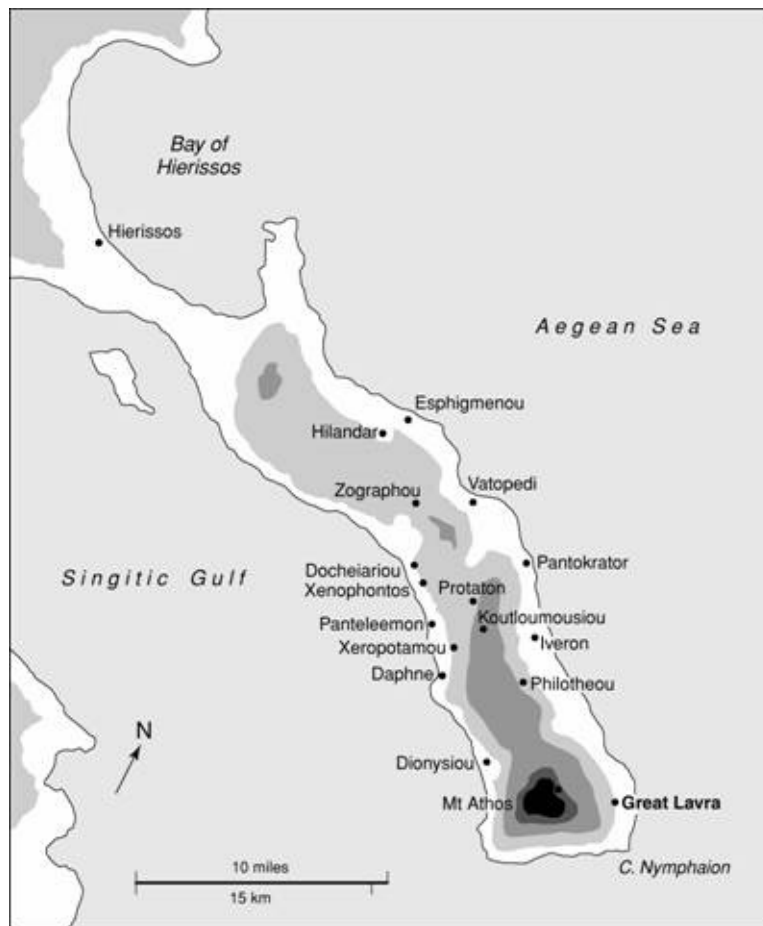
D. M. Nicol, *Meteora: The Rock Monasteries of Thessaly*. London, 1975.

archives of the monasteries of Mount Athos, of land, property, and the people who lived in the villages of Macedonia during this period. The monasteries, as we have said, were wealthy in almost all periods, and during this time as well

they prospered from gifts provided by the poor and especially the wealthy, both inside and outside the Byzantine empire. The monks of Athos carefully administered their property and kept detailed records. Since most of the monasteries have survived up to the present, many of the records have been preserved and they provide us with a rare glimpse into the lives and the toils of the people living on the land.

Thus, it is still possible, through the mid fourteenth century at least, to speak of an integrated Byzantine economy, in which the central state continued to play some role through its policies, taxes, and the striking of coinage. The mixed system of land tenure from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries continued, with considerable regional variation, especially as affected by various periods of foreign domination. Most peasants, of course, did not work primarily on their own land, but the agrarian economy remained productive when external forces (invasions, civil wars, etc.) did not intervene. Likewise, agricultural production was diversified and characterized by different modes of cultivation. Most peasants would not have been well off, but neither were they involved simply in subsistence agriculture, and they continued to play some role in larger exchange networks.

**Map 14.3** Monasteries of Mount Athos (after A. Kazhdan et al., eds, *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (New York, 1991), p. 224)



Around the middle of the fourteenth century most of this changed. Asia Minor had long been wracked by warfare among competing dynasties and the arrival of, first, the Catalans and then the Ottomans in Europe brought incessant warfare to that area. This was, unfortunately, accompanied by incessant civil war after 1321, and the situation became desperate. There is evidence of population decline throughout the empire during the first half of the century and then the Black Death broke out within the empire in 1348. This certainly had a larger impact in the cities (as it did throughout Europe), but it also helped to cripple the broader economic base and bring the economic system to its knees.

This situation can be seen in many parts of the empire, perhaps most strikingly in the small village settlement of Panakton, in the border region between Attica and Boiotia, which was recently subjected to detailed scientific excavation. The settlement was small and located on the top of a defensible hilltop. It seems to have been inhabited only from about the middle of the fourteenth century and was abandoned around the middle of the fifteenth century. The excavations suggest that the people were farmers, although at least some of the men may also have been soldiers. They lived at a fairly basic economic level and their situation



overall seems to reflect the difficulties that confronted most parts of the empire in the years after 1350.

## **Cultural Developments of the Fourteenth Century**

Despite the political, economic, and military difficulties, the fourteenth century witnessed many cultural developments that were built especially on the accomplishments of the twelfth century, modified by intimate contact with western ideas and traditions resulting from the Crusader dominance of most of the empire. Thus, fourteenth-century Byzantine culture was based partly on the individualism and secularism of the twelfth century, including the development of a distinct Byzantine aristocratic culture, but this was then enriched and refined by contact with the similar but very different world of the Latin West. In the end, the Latin conquerors who came to the central lands of the Byzantine Empire brought with them many new ideas, but these were absorbed into a truly multicultural environment. That was evident in the thirteenth century, but the results in the fourteenth century were much richer still. Obviously this differed from region to region, and we must always remember that the cultural achievements of this period were built largely on the labor of the farmers and tradespeople, whether they were Byzantine or Latin.

One can see the results of these developments in a variety of ways, from the growing sophistication of Byzantine philosophy and theology as a result of contact with western ideas (as discussed above) to trends and changes in architecture and art. One of the most notable aspects of the art of this period is the concern of painters for three-dimensional rendering, fineness of detail, and the utilization of a broad spectrum of colors. We can certainly see regional developments in the art of the Palaiologan period, but most of the overall tendencies are visible in surviving works from throughout the empire. Thus, the magnificent mosaics and frescoes of the church of the Savior of Chora in Constantinople (Kariye Camii) were dedicated by the important statesman and scholar Theodore Metochites in 1315–21. The colorful representations are alive with color, detail, and action, with remarkable vignettes and broad expressions of power such as the unmatched representation of Christ's Descent into Hell, where the intensity of the figures makes them seem as if they could almost jump off the wall. Likewise, the realism and plasticity of figures in the many churches of

Mystras, the capital of the Byzantine Despotate of the Morea, point the way to the Renaissance, which was just beginning in contemporary Italy. The same tendencies can be seen in the architecture of the period, with remarkable variation of shapes and the clear development of local schools in Macedonia, Constantinople, central Greece, and the Morea, and in Slavic lands beyond the frontier of the empire. Surface treatment of the exterior becomes common, domes multiply, and fantasy, conceit, and a marriage of Byzantine and western techniques are exhibited at every turn.

## **Byzantium as an Ottoman Vassal: The Reign of John V**

Perhaps fortunately for John V, Stefan Dušan, one of Byzantium's most serious enemies (as well as imitators), died suddenly in 1355 and his successor Stefan Uroš V Nežak (1355–71) was not able to hold together the empire his father had built. As a result, a number of weak Greco-Serbian principalities sprang up in the Balkans, but Byzantium was not able to take advantage of the vacuum in the region, and it was increasingly clear that the real power in the Balkans was the Ottoman Turks, who first set foot in Thrace in 1354.

It is questionable to what extent Ottoman policy in Europe was actually directed by the sultan and to what extent it was the work of independent Turkish warlords, but in 1361 Turkish forces took Dydimoteichon and by the end of the decade the important city of Adrianople. Significant numbers of Ottoman settlers moved into Thrace, seeking land in the newly conquered territories. Murad (1362–89), the son of Orhan, had grand ambitions for the Ottoman state and he slowly brought most of the rulers of the Balkans under his sway.

In this situation John V sought western aid through the old expedient of holding out the prospect of a union of the churches. In 1355 he sent a letter to Pope Innocent VI at Avignon, making all kinds of extravagant promises on condition that the pope send military help to the beleaguered empire. The pope did nothing and John formed an alliance with his cousin, Amadeo VI of Savoy, who planned a crusade to conquer the Holy Lands and assist Byzantium into the bargain. The crusade actually did set off in 1366 and managed to take Kallipolis from the Ottomans. John sought a church council to discuss union, but Pope Urban V dismissed this idea, suggesting instead that the Byzantine emperor come to Rome. Perhaps moved by the loss of Adrianople, John V did make a

journey to Italy, and in October of 1369 he made a personal profession of the Catholic faith and submitted himself publicly to the authority of the pope. John remained for some time in Rome and then in Venice, not returning to Constantinople until the autumn of 1371. Unfortunately, the abasement of the emperor did not result in any aid from the West.

### **Box 14.3 St. Anastasia the Poison-Curer**

This fresco is from the narthex of the church of the Panagia (Virgin Mary) Phorbiotissa of Asinou in Cyprus. This important building was constructed in the early twelfth century by a certain Nikephoros, who held the high rank of *magistros* at the imperial court during the reign of Alexios Komnenos; the title does not allow us to tell precisely what duties Nikephoros had, but it attests his importance in Constantinople. Other inscriptions in the church show that this same Nikephoros retired to Asinou, where he founded a monastery and became its first abbot. The main dedicatory inscription reveals the donor's motive: "I, Nikephoros *magistros*, a poor suppliant, erected this church with longing, in return for which, I pray that you will be my patron in the terrible day of Judgment."

**Figure 14.7** St. Anastasia the Poison-Curer (Pharmakolytria). From the church of the Panagia (Virgin Mary) Phorbiotissa at Asinou in Cyprus. St. Anastasia is shown with her bottle of medicine, ready to offer aid to sufferers. Below her and shown much smaller is the woman who paid to have the picture painted (the donor), Anastasia Saramalina. She is dressed in clothing that shows western European influence in Cyprus in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Photo © Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Image Collections & Fieldwork Archives, Washington DC.



The fresco of St. Anastasia is in the narthex of the church and it was painted in the fourteenth century. The saint is depicted holding a cross in her right hand and a white bottle of medicine in her left. The donor of the fresco was a certain Anastasia Saramalina, who is shown on a lower level than the saint and of a smaller size. She is praying to the saint, with her hands extended in the usual gesture that indicates supplication. The donor is dressed in rich white clothes under a cloak that is fastened at the neck. Her head-covering is of the same material as her clothes (presumably silk) and is derived from western fashion. The artist was concerned to depict Saramalina in a realistic fashion, showing her face wrinkled by old age. Both figures have their faces fully frontal (i.e., looking at the worshipers in the church), although the donor is obviously meant to be facing the saint.

St. Anastasia is depicted as calm and self-confident, obviously ready to help those who call upon her. Little is known about this saint; she may be remotely connected with a Roman saint who was martyred in the Diocletianic persecution, but there is another tradition assigning her to Thessaloniki. Her powers included not only release from physical poisoning but also (and probably more commonly) from the ill-effects of magic spells.

### ***FURTHER READING***

D. Winfield and E. J. W. Hawkins, "The Church of Our Lady at Asinou, Cyprus," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 21 (1967), 261–6.

In the absence of the emperor, the situation in the Balkans deteriorated further. The successors of Stefan Uroš, Vukasin and his brother Jovan Uglesa, attempted to organize opposition to Ottoman expansion, and on September 26, 1371 (about

a month before John V's return), the Serbs confronted the Ottoman army at the Maritsa River near Cernomen (Map 9.1). The Serbian forces were annihilated and the whole of the southern Balkans lay open to the Ottomans. John V saw the lesson from this battle, and shortly after his arrival in Constantinople he sought a treaty with the sultan Murad, hoping that in this manner the Ottomans could be persuaded to leave Byzantium in possession of its few holdings in Thrace. As a condition of this treaty, however, John had to recognize the sultan as his superior and to pay regular tribute and contribute troops to the Ottoman army when asked to do so. Thus, in a short period John had submitted himself to two of Byzantium's enemies, first the pope and then the Ottoman sultan.

In this era of Byzantine dependency upon the Ottomans, relations between the Byzantine and the Ottoman aristocracies were close; this was made clear in the unfortunate events that marked the rest of John V's reign. A vicious disagreement broke out between John V and his son, who had already been crowned as the co-emperor Andronikos IV. In 1373 Andronikos joined with Sultan Murad's son Savci Çelebi in a joint revolt designed to overthrow both their fathers. The revolt was savagely put down, Savci Çelebi was probably killed, and Andronikos and his young son John (later VII) were imprisoned and partially blinded. John V elevated his second son Manuel as co-emperor, but in 1376 Andronikos escaped from prison and, with help from the Genoese and the Ottomans, seized the throne, in turn imprisoning John V and Manuel. The same scenario was re-enacted after another three years and the elder emperor was again in power, while Andronikos established himself in Galata. This standoff was presumably ended in 1381, when an agreement was made in which Andronikos was reconciled to his father, accepted as heir, and the succession of his son, John VII, was assured. John V's son Manuel, now left outside the succession, fled to Thessaloniki, from which he gained control over much of Thessaly and Epiros. The sultan regarded Manuel as a serious enemy, since he had broken his oath of vassalage to the Ottomans, and he sent one of his most trusted generals to take Thessaloniki. Manuel sought to make a resolute stand, but he received no outside assistance, and the inhabitants of the city seemed willing to surrender it, so in 1387 the emperor left the city to its own resources, and Ottoman troops entered the gates without opposition. Manuel later appeared in the sultan's court (in Bursa) as a suppliant and was restored to his father in Constantinople.

This whole series of events highlights the continued infighting within the Palaiologan family and their apparent inability to cooperate in a manner to make

the most of the resources the Byzantines had. It also shows the way in which the Ottoman sultan controlled internal Byzantine politics, since in each case – although the Byzantine claimant sought the support of the Genoese or the Venetians – the sultan made the final determination, selecting, normally, the side that offered him the greatest monetary payment.

Murad meanwhile continued his expansion northward in the Balkans. He took Sofia in 1385 and Niš in 1386. In that same year the sultan was forced to return to Asia Minor to deal with an invasion from the east. Byzantium might have used the occasion to reassert its independence, but John V was aged, and the events of the past 15 years had rendered him essentially impotent. The opportunity, however, was seized by the Serbian nobility, led by the prince Lazar, the most powerful figure from 1371 onward, and Vuk Branković, ruler of the area of Kosovo, along with the prince of Bosnia Tvrtko I. In the absence of the sultan, the Serbian forces had some success, inspiring Bulgaria to proclaim its independence of the Ottomans. Murad returned to the Balkans and dealt with the situation in a characteristically methodical fashion. He gathered a large army, in part made up of levies from the Christian peoples of the region, and forced the Bulgarians to submit. The Serbs and their allies sought to make a desperate stand on the plain of Kosovo (Kosovo Polje), on June 15, 1389 (Map 9.1). This battle, which sealed the fate of the Balkans for centuries to come, has come to play a critical role in legend and heroic tales, especially for the Serbs, and it is difficult to separate fact from romantic fantasy. The Ottomans were commanded by Murad himself, while the leader of the Serbs was the prince Lazar. It seems that the Serbs were seriously outnumbered and they suffered from internal dissension and a lack of confidence. Lazar was at first successful, but at a critical moment – at least according to the legend – Vuk Branković deserted his companions, and the Serbs were stopped by Bayezid, the sultan's son and heir. Murad was killed in the battle, but Bayezid led the Ottomans to a complete victory and slaughtered many of the vanquished, including Lazar himself.

As sultan (1389–1402), Bayezid carefully organized the new territory, imposing a head tax, or *haradj*, on all non-Muslim inhabitants and forcing the Christian princes to swear personal fealty to himself. Lazar's son Stefan Lazarević was regarded as the leader (or despot) of the Serbs, and he faithfully maintained his loyalty to the sultan to the end of his days, maintaining a certain political independence from the Turks and presiding over an efflorescence of Serbian culture.

After the Battle of Kosovo Constantinople was completely isolated and

surrounded by Ottoman territory, in both Europe and Asia; the only significant territory remaining in loose Byzantine control was the Morea (Peloponnesos), controlled by Byzantium from 1262 and organized as a despotate after 1349. Bayezid was a ruler of immense ability and ambition, and, even more than his father, he was able to exploit disagreements in the Byzantine ruling family for his own ends. Byzantium experienced some relief, as Bayezid occupied himself with a show of military force in Asia Minor, but he soon conspired with Andronikos' son John VII, who was able to seize Constantinople with Ottoman help. The aged John V, however, refused to give up, and he retook the throne with the help of his son Manuel. Bayezid peremptorily summoned both younger emperors, Manuel and John VII, to assist him in his campaigns in Asia Minor, and the two Byzantine princes were forced to take part in the subjection of Philadelphia, the last Christian city to defy the sultan in western Asia. John V, meanwhile, barely survived these events and he died in 1391 a broken and weak man.

### **Box 14.4 Byzantium and its Neighbors in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries**

The international situation changed dramatically in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. As far as Byzantium was concerned, the most significant of these changes were, of course, the Fourth Crusade, the fall of Constantinople, the establishment of Crusader states on Byzantine territory, and the emergence of the Byzantine successor states. At the same time, however, great changes were also taking place in the broader world of which Byzantium was a part. Indeed, from the latter part of the twelfth century onward, the Byzantine Empire was less and less a major player on the world scene and was more and more affected by events happening elsewhere. Clearly we should not see this in fatalistic or deterministic terms, since there is no reason to think that, at least until the end of the fourteenth century, Byzantium was doomed to failure or complete marginalization. Indeed, in the past Byzantium had frequently been able to defy its apparent fate and rise again to a position of power and even dominance, so there was no intrinsic reason why that could not happen again. Nonetheless, for the complex world of the fourteenth century, it is especially important to consider the changes and developments among the peoples surrounding the Byzantine Empire in order to understand internal developments.

#### ***The West***

During the thirteenth century western Europe continued to develop politically and to expand economically. The national monarchies of France, England, and Spain grew out of the formative phase of the twelfth century into greater maturity and institutional development. The rulers of France were long-lived and they managed to consolidate royal power to a point where, by the early part of the fourteenth century France was the largest and most powerful state in the West. The kings of England also maintained considerable power, but they had to fight the emergence of powerful local feudal lords and in the end kings such as Edward I (1272–1307) came to rely partly on parliament to enforce royal power. Spain necessarily focused on the tension between the

powerful and sophisticated Umayyad caliphate of Córdoba (and the successor Taifa kingdoms) and the emerging power of the small Christian kingdoms. As in previous centuries Germany did not participate in this broader tendency toward political centralization, in part because of the elective character of the position of emperor and the tendencies of emperors to be involved in affairs elsewhere, a situation which allowed the powerful German nobility nearindependence. Individual emperors, such as Frederick II (1212–50) were extraordinary powerful, but Frederick focused his attention largely on Italy and had been king of Sicily (including southern Italy) from 1198 onward. Indeed, the power of Frederick II once again threatened the papacy, which had reached the peak of its power during the pontificate of Innocent III (1198–1216).

After the death of Frederick II the small states of northern Italy were able to assert their independence, most notably Florence and Milan and, of course, the maritime republics of Venice, Genoa, and Pisa, which continued their domination of trade in the eastern Mediterranean as the basis of considerable wealth and political power. The papacy, meantime, continued its struggle with the secular rulers of Europe, especially with the king of France. Thus, Pope Boniface VIII (1294–1303) rejected the orders of King Philip IV (1285–1314) that members of the French clergy pay taxes to the state, saying that could be done only on the approval of the pope. Philip responded by kidnapping the pope, demonstrating that some rulers, at least, were willing to resort to force in order to assert their power in the face of papal claims to supremacy. Eventually a new pope (Clement V, 1305–14) was elected and Philip IV arranged for him to leave Rome and take up residence at Avignon in France. This led to the weakening of papal authority and ultimately a period of some 40 years (lasting until 1417) in which there were two popes, one in France and one in Italy. Such a situation naturally gave rise to a call for reform in the western church, and one approach was to summon councils of bishops who, it was hoped, might restore the prestige and the standing of the church. Despite many difficulties, one such attempt finally succeeded and the so-called Great Schism in the western church was healed. But, given these events, the papacy could hardly have made the situation in the eastern Mediterranean a high priority.

Certainly, papal interest in the submission of the Byzantine church remained a significant desideratum, especially since the Crusades (including the establishment of the Latin empire in 1204) had failed to achieve that aim. In the aftermath of those events and in a situation of apparent Byzantine military weakness, the papacy came to use the promise of military aid as a means to secure the religious submission of the East. As we have seen, the former came to pass at the second Council of Lyons in 1274, when Michael VIII agreed to such a union (that was later formally repudiated by a local council of Constantinople in 1285, the so-called Council of Blachernai). The appearance of the Ottoman Turks in Europe, from 1348 onward, and their seizure of Kallipolis in 1354 caused alarm in Europe. As we have seen, the emperor John V Palaiologos sought to take advantage of this by seeking western aid. He proposed another church council to discuss the union of the churches, but Pope Urban V dismissed the idea. Nevertheless, in 1366 Amadeo VI of Savoy, a cousin of John V Palaiologos (hence his interest in Byzantine affairs) led a crusading force against the Turks, essentially the first time Crusaders had actually allied themselves with the Byzantines. Amadeo recovered Kallipolis for Byzantium and attacked several cities in Bulgaria, and he encouraged John to pursue the possibility of further western aid with another act of submission to the western church. As we have seen, in 1369 John made the journey to Rome, personally accepted the papal terms, but received nothing in return. A similar situation occurred at the very end of the fourteenth century at the time of the so-called Crusade of Nikopolis (1394–6).

In broad terms the fourteenth century witnessed a significant downturn in western Europe, after the growth, prosperity, and general stability from the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries. This was a result, first of all, of the Black Plague that followed on the heels of what appears to have been a deterioration of the climate in Europe, with a slight drop in temperatures and disastrous weather events early in the fourteenth century. Beginning in 1347, the plague swept quickly



through western Europe which led to precipitous population decline (perhaps in the vicinity of 30 percent) and attendant social, psychological, economic, and cultural problems. On top of this was the Hundred Years War, a monumental confrontation between England and France (1337–1453) that brought devastation and desolation to both nations and revolutionized war and introduced gunpowder to western European conflict.

The Hundred Years War also had important ramifications on politics and governmental structures in both countries. The conduct of the war primarily in France gave the French royal house an internal advantage, as it encouraged the growth of royal power, especially under the reign of Charles V (1364–80) and the willingness of the nobility and the city-dwellers to support the power of centralized monarchy. On the other hand, the fact that the English war effort was based on a determination to preserve territories in France that belonged to the family of the British king weakened support for the struggle and caused the kings to make concessions, especially to the cities and the wealthy of the realm, and thus strengthened the parliamentary system that had begun in earlier centuries. To put this in the context of the Byzantine Empire, both of these European powers were closely involved with their own struggles in these years and had no opportunity or interest in the situation in the eastern Mediterranean. In addition, by this time the crusading movement had been largely discredited and the leading figures of northwestern Europe were preoccupied with issues and concerns of their own, closer to home.

### ***The Balkans and the North***

The most important phenomenon of the thirteenth century in the area north and east of Byzantium was the appearance of the Mongols. The descendants of Genghis Khan (ca. 1162–1227) conquered China, Iran, and most of the Middle East, and they subdued southern Russia and reached Poland in 1241 before being distracted by problems farther east. The result of this was that during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the steppe corridor was relatively quiet and the Balkans were influenced primarily by forces originating in the south and the west. Thus, the fall of Constantinople in 1204 and the establishment of the Crusader states transformed the political situation completely, while western influence was exerted from the Adriatic coast by the Venetians and from Catholic Europe by Hungary and the German states. Meanwhile, the Slavic states that had developed in past centuries generally flourished in the thirteenth and the first half of the fourteenth century.

### **Bulgaria**

From 1185 onward the second Bulgarian empire took advantage of Byzantine weakness and then the disarray of the Latin successor states to dominate much of the southern Balkans. A revolt against Byzantine rule was nearly put down by Isaac II Angelos, but the tsar Kaloyan (1197–1207) opened negotiations with the papacy and, after 1204, he inflicted serious defeats on the Latin empire of Constantinople, preventing it from having any significant impact in the Balkan peninsula. Under Ivan Asen II (1218–41) Bulgaria expanded significantly, in the north at the expense of Hungary and in the south at the expense of the despotate of Epiros. In the second half of the thirteenth century Bulgaria suffered a significant decline, first after devastation wrought by the Mongols in 1242, after which Bulgaria remained technically a Mongol vassal until the early fourteenth century. Bulgaria lost territory to the Empire of Nicaea and a resurgent Byzantine Empire, and also to Hungary. In the fourteenth century there was a significant revival of Bulgarian power, although they were defeated by the Serbs in 1330. The reign of Tsar Ivan Alexander (1331–71) brought about a renewed period of stability, followed by a division of the state and a military weakness that provided little resistance to the Ottomans. By 1396 all of Bulgaria was in Ottoman

hands.

## **Serbia**

Stefan Nemanjić (Stefan the First-Crowned, prince 1196–1217, king 1217–28), was the second son of Stefan Nemanja and first king of Serbia. He was married to Evdokia Angelina, daughter of Alexios III Angelos (emperor 1195–1203) and was able to take advantage of the chaos of the period to establish Serbia more firmly as a unified state. The reign of Stefan's second son, Stefan Uroš II (1243–76), corresponded to the weakness of some of Serbia's enemies, and he was able to build the economic strength of Serbia. His successor Stefan Uroš III Milutin (1282–1321) made Serbia the most powerful state in southeast Europe, with territories that stretched from the borders of Hungarian territories in the north to the heartland of Byzantine European territories in the south. In 1282–4 he conquered Albania and northern Macedonia, establishing his capital at Skopje. During the reign of Milutin Byzantine cultural influence swept over Serbia and many of the fine Byzantine buildings that survive in the area date to this period. Stefan Uroš IV Dušan (1331–55) was the most successful and most powerful ruler of medieval Serbia. He spent most of his reign at war with Byzantium, taking advantage of the contemporary civil war to win great victories and control of virtually the whole of Byzantine territories in Europe, with the exception of the far south. After Dušan's death, the great empire he developed quickly came apart and was succeeded by a number of minor principalities, whose failure to act together was in part responsible for the success of Ottoman expansion (see below) and the Battle of Kosovo in 1389. The exception was Prince Lazar, who gained control of northern Serbia, contested several areas with Hungary, and died at Kosovo, insuring his place as a hero of Serb nationalism.

## **Hungary**

In the second half of the twelfth century, Hungary was very much in the broader orbit of the Byzantine Empire, and relations between the two states were cordial and promising, especially given Manuel I Komnenos' ideas about marriage alliances and an "opening" to the West. Bela III, king of Hungary (1172–96), had been educated in Constantinople and was even considered briefly as a possible heir of Manuel I. Manuel ultimately helped Bela ascend the throne of Hungary, and after Manuel's death in 1080 Bela conquered Croatia, Dalmatia, Belgrade, and the Morava Valley, but he remained on good terms with Isaac II Angelos, who married Bela's daughter. After 1204, however, Hungary moved largely outside the immediate Byzantine sphere, and played only a minor role in affairs affecting Byzantium. Instead, in the Balkans Hungary was more closely involved with Serbia in contesting leadership and ultimately seeking to stave off Ottoman expansion in the latter part of the fourteenth century. In 1366 John V Palaiologos sought assistance from Lajos (Louis) I of Hungary, and several of the last-minute attempts to prevent the fall of Constantinople focused on Hungarian assistance.

## ***Turks and the Islamic World***

Toward the end of the thirteenth century the Seljuk sultanate of Rum, which held control over most of west central Asia Minor, began to dissolve and was replaced by a set of some ten smaller Turkic states. One of these was ruled by a certain Osman (founder of the Ottoman dynasty), who is first noted in a contemporary source for 1302, defeating a Byzantine force in the region of Nikomedia in Bithynia. In 1326 Osman's successor Orhan (1326–62) captured Bursa (Byzantine Prusa) in Bithynia and established his capital there. Despite opposition from Andronikos III, Orhan then conquered the rest of Byzantine Bithynia, taking Nicaea in 1331 and Nikomedia in 1337. From 1345 onward Orhan was involved in the Byzantine civil war and he married Theodora, daughter of John VI Kantakouzenos. He used his Byzantine connections to further the ambitions of his sons and took advantage of the military situation to send Ottoman troops to Europe, beginning in 1348.

In 1354 Orhan's forces took Kallipolis (modern Gallipoli on the European side of the Bosphoros) and from there began the conquest of Thrace and the rest of the Balkans. Kallipolis was temporarily returned to Byzantine hands, but the Ottomans continued their advance. Orhan's son and successor Murad I (1362–89) defeated the Serbs at the Battle of Marica in 1371, after which most of the southern Balkans lay open to them. Murad followed his father's policy of close involvement in Byzantine affairs, as the civil war between rival factions in Constantinople continued. Virtually all of the claimants to the Byzantine throne sought the aid of the Ottomans and in order to obtain it they were willing to accept Ottoman suzerainty and to promise to aid the Turks in their wars of conquest. The only reasonably steadfast Byzantine opponent of Murad was Manuel Palaiologos, but even his defense of Thessaloniki came to nothing when, in 1387, the citizens of the city handed it over to the Turks. Manuel's brother, Theodore I Palaiologos, despot of Mystras became Murad's vassal in the same year. Byzantium was thus forced to support the sultan against the rising of Lazar and the events that led to the Battle of Kosovo in 1389, the monumental conflict in which Murad was killed but which also brought about the Ottoman subjugation of Serbia and Bosnia.

Murad's successor Bayezid I (1389–1402) initially continued the traditional arrangement with Byzantium and presumably assisted in the elevation of Manuel II Palaiologos in 1391. Bayezid secured Ottoman control after the Battle of Kosovo and attempted to regulate affairs as far north as the Danube. In addition, he sought to consolidate his hold over central Asia Minor with the annexation of a number of Anatolian emirates. In 1394, after the political situation in Constantinople proved unstable, Bayezid finally decided to besiege the city and about the same time he sent troops into southern Greece to attack the despotate of Morea. Alarmed by these events, in 1394 Pope Boniface IX called for a crusade to defeat Bayezid, and this was met with significant response from many western European countries and from the few eastern European states that were then independent of the Ottomans, among them Hungary and Wallachia. The forces of the so-called Crusade of Nikopolis marched overland to the Danube and then, in 1396, to the powerfully defended city of Nikopolis on the Black Sea, where they were decisively defeated by the Turks. Bayezid resumed his siege of Constantinople but was called away to deal with the threat posed by Timur Lenk in central Anatolia. There, in 1402, at the Battle of Ankara, Bayezid was defeated and captured, and the Ottoman state was, temporarily, thrown into disarray.

## **Manuel II Palaiologos (1391–1425)**

Hearing of his father's death, Manuel escaped the watchful eye of the Turks and returned to Constantinople, where he was immediately hailed as emperor. Bayezid, sultan from 1389, accepted the fait accompli, but he imposed new restrictions on Constantinople and forced the new emperor to join his nephew John VII and the Ottoman army in a long and arduous military campaign in Asia Minor. Toward the beginning of 1392 Manuel returned to Constantinople and soon thereafter married Helena, daughter of the Serbian prince of Serres, Constantine Dragas. Manuel himself was a talented and intelligent ruler who might have flourished in different circumstances. He had the literary and theological tendencies of his grandfather, John Kantakouzenos, and he attempted

to make the most of what was a very difficult political and military situation, maintaining the dignity and the traditions of the Byzantine Empire as far as possible. The successive patriarchs of Constantinople strongly supported the emperor and the central place of Byzantium in the overall world order. Thus, when Basil, the prince of Moscow, forbade the commemoration of the emperor in the Russian liturgy, saying “We have a church; an emperor we do not have,” the patriarch reacted strongly and answered Basil with a letter setting out the traditional doctrine of the position of the emperor as the ruler of the *oikoumene*.

Hungary remained the only other Christian power in southeast Europe that so far had escaped the Ottoman yoke, and in 1393 the Hungarians encouraged the Bulgarian king John Sisman to revolt against the Ottomans. Bayezid reacted immediately and re-established his control over Bulgaria, ending its vassal status and ruling it thenceforth as a province (*pashalik*) of his empire – a fate that many of the Balkan vassals imagined would soon be their own. In 1394 Bayezid began a blockade of Constantinople, and the population was reduced to starvation, relieved only by a shipment of grain brought by the Venetians. The Christian powers still controlled the sea, and Constantinople once again sought its salvation from the West, but the situation was serious for the city.

In 1392/3 the Turks conquered Thessaly and by 1395 Wallachia had become tributary to the Ottomans. The invasion of Thessaly showed both the Greeks and the Latins of central Greece and the Peloponnesos that they too were threatened by Ottoman expansion. These events finally encouraged the West to lend some aid, and a new crusading spirit swept through Europe. Led by Sigismund of Hungary, an army of some 100,000 soldiers (much larger than those of the earlier crusades), made up the so-called Crusade of Nikopolis which gathered in Hungary in 1396. The approach of the crusading army caused Bayezid to lift the blockade of Constantinople, and he rushed away to the Danube. The crusaders – as in the past – disagreed about the conduct of the war, with the Hungarians advocating caution but the French calling for a direct attack on the Turks. Initially the crusaders met with some success, but on September 15, 1396, disaster struck as the French cavalry was led into a trap and massacred, and the whole of the crusading army dissolved in flight.

With the end of this threat, Bayezid resumed the siege of Constantinople and in 1397 an Ottoman army marched from Thessaly into central Greece and the Peloponnesos, meeting with virtually no opposition and taking Athens and Argos before returning to Thessaly. At least some of the Venetians, meanwhile, seem to have come to understand the seriousness of the threat, and they promised

military and financial support to the Byzantines. Manuel sent delegations to all the rulers of the West, seeking aid and receiving vague promises of money and armies. Charles VI, king of France, was especially interested, since he had recently become overlord of Genoa (and hence he controlled Genoa's trading interests and colonies in the East). Marshal Charles Boucicaut, a veteran of the Crusade of Nikopolis who had been captured and ransomed, was sent with a small force of 1,200 soldiers that forced its way through the Ottoman blockade and landed at Constantinople in 1399.

Boucicaut was immediately aware that a much larger force was necessary to defend the city, and he persuaded Manuel to return with him to Europe to seek such support. The marshal was also able to convince John VII to become reconciled with his uncle and rule the city in his absence. As a result, Manuel II took his family and set off for the West. This strange embassy, lasting more than three years, is one of the more ironic events in the long history of the empire. Manuel's visit was in stark contrast to that of his father some years earlier, not only because the Ottoman threat was much more real, but also because western scholars had now become infatuated with Greek learning and they looked upon the Byzantines as the purveyors of that culture. In addition, Manuel was an attractive and proud ruler and, although he came seeking western help, he did so with pride and he did not raise the issue of church union or offer once again to subject the Byzantine church to the rule of the pope. Manuel traveled through Italy; in 1400 he reached Paris and, toward the end of the year, London. There he was warmly received by King Henry IV, who made grandiose promises and actually gave the emperor a small sum (which had probably been collected by his predecessor). Optimistic that he would receive military support from the English, Manuel returned to Paris early in 1401. There he continued to carry out negotiations for military aid, but after a year of frustration he finally began to realize that nothing would be forthcoming and that he would have to return to Constantinople empty-handed. Meanwhile, the emperor passed his time writing treatises of a literary and theological nature – testifying to both his erudition and his continued allegiance to the Orthodox church.

Meanwhile, in Constantinople the French troops of Boucicaut continued to hold out against the Ottomans, but the population was driven to despair from hunger. Some – even the regent John VII, the Genoese, and the patriarch himself – were accused of collusion with the Turks, although there is no clear evidence of this. Bayezid, meanwhile, was confident he would take the city, and he is reported to have sat at a distance, marking out the various parts of

Constantinople he would give to his lieutenants. Finally, as the situation became even more desperate, the miracle the Christians had been waiting for took place. Rumors began to reach Constantinople and the West that a great leader of the East (perhaps a Christian) had arisen and was defeating the Turks. This was Timur-lenk, known in English as Tamerlane, the Mongol chieftain whose armies swept from Samarkand into Afghanistan and India, north into Russia, then on to Georgia, Armenia, and Asia Minor. There they encountered the independent Turcoman emirates that had not yet been incorporated into Bayezid's empire, and then, in 1400, they entered Ottoman territory, taking the city of Sivas (Byzantine Sebaste) and massacring its inhabitants. Interestingly, there is evidence that the Christian powers, perhaps even Manuel himself, had long been aware of Timur's power, and they had hoped that he might become their ally against the Ottomans (and, indeed, that he might become a Christian himself ).

Timur decided on a massive invasion of Anatolia, and in 1402 Bayezid brought a great army to meet him, abandoning the siege of Constantinople as a result. The Battle of Ankara on July 28, 1402 was a complete victory for the Mongols: some 15,000 Turks and their Christian allies are said to have been killed and Bayezid himself was captured. He died the next year in captivity, and his empire lay in shambles. Timur ravaged all of Asia Minor, taking Smyrna and massacring its inhabitants. Diplomatically he sought the support of the emirs, who had remained at least partly independent of the Ottomans, and he encouraged the sons of Bayezid to fight each other over the succession. The most successful of these was Suleiman, who managed to find his way to Europe, which remained untouched by the Mongols, and he established himself at Adrianople.

Timur, however, was not ultimately interested in the administration of his conquests and in 1403 he left Asia Minor. He returned to Samarkand and then set off to conquer China, where he died in 1405. Tamerlane was gone, but the empire of Bayezid was shattered and divided, and, of course, the siege of Constantinople was now forgotten. The Byzantine Empire had been given another lease of life, and only the future could tell whether it would be able to take advantage of the respite to build its strength again.

Manuel II was naturally encouraged by the news of Tamerlane's victories, but he was still slow to return to Constantinople, and he made a great procession from Paris to Venice, and then on to the Morea, where his family had been staying. He finally arrived in the capital toward the middle of 1403. Meanwhile, Bayezid's son Suleiman came to an understanding with the regency of John VII

in Constantinople. The situation of the Ottomans was reflected in the terms of the treaty, in which Byzantium was no longer required to pay tribute, Mount Athos and Thessaloniki were restored to the empire, and Suleiman even declared himself the vassal of the emperor, seeking only to be left alone in his possession of Thrace. Upon his return Manuel confirmed the treaty and sealed it by marrying his illegitimate niece (the daughter of Theodore I, despot of the Morea) to Suleiman. Rivalry broke out again between John VII and his uncle, but an accommodation was made and John became the governor of Thessaloniki and Thrace.

The weakness of the Ottomans and the warfare that soon broke out among the sons of Bayezid further aided the Byzantine recovery, and Manuel sought to establish unified control by the establishment of his young sons as despot of the Morea (after the death of his brother Theodore in 1407) and of Thessaloniki (after the death of John VII the next year). The Ottoman civil war lasted for ten years, and Manuel made the best he could of the situation. In the end he sided with Bayezid's son Mehmed in his struggle with his brothers for control of Thrace, and the Serbs and some other Christian groups joined him in this. Mehmed I (1402–21) ultimately prevailed, Manuel was rewarded by the renewal of all the provisions of the earlier treaty, and Mehmed was beholden to him and well disposed to the Christian princes of the Balkans.

Manuel, however, was already in his sixties and it was clear that the Turks were still the greatest power in the region. The emperor sought, however, to solidify his control, especially in the areas he had assigned to his sons, and in 1414 he undertook an extended tour of his domains. He traveled to Thessaloniki and then sailed to the Morea, pausing at the Isthmus of Corinth to rebuild the Hexamilion, the wall nearly six miles long that he hoped would help keep the Turks out of the Peloponnesos. This was a remarkable achievement, and the Venetians congratulated him on his success. Manuel journeyed on to Mistras and finally returned to Constantinople in 1416.

Manuel meanwhile maintained a formally friendly relationship with the sultan Mehmed (sometimes called a gentlemen's agreement), and Mehmed was in fact busy with the task of restoring Ottoman control in Asia Minor and putting down minor revolts (some of which were, in fact, aided by Manuel). Manuel renewed his negotiations with the western powers, but the rivalry between Venice and Hungary and the weakness of the papacy doomed these attempts to failure.

The year 1421 was eventful for Byzantium. Manuel was by now old and he crowned his son John VIII as co-emperor and heir. Soon thereafter the sultan

Mehmed died suddenly in uncertain circumstances and was succeeded by his son, Murad II (1421–51). Manuel and his son disagreed as to how to react to the change of regime: the old emperor was in favor of an alliance with Murad, but John VIII sought to exploit the situation by supporting a rival. Murad quickly prevailed and he furiously attacked Constantinople, determined to take the city and punish the Byzantines for their perfidy. This siege was serious, but the old emperor played his last hand by once again stirring up rivals to the sultan, forcing Murad to lift the siege, and finally, in 1424, to sign a peace treaty that provided a temporary respite but placed Constantinople again in an inferior position as a tribute-paying vassal of the sultan. The situation had returned, more or less, to what it had been 22 years earlier. The opportunity for a Byzantine recovery had passed.

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